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Why ranking has reached the end of the road

We are opting not to publish tables of top scorers because of the effect testing has been shown to have on children. Polly Curtis explains

Education Guardian, Thursday 6 December 2007 18.43 EST

We've been obsessed with league tables. We like lists of favourite foods, top ten Christmas presents, the worst theme tunes ever and, for the past 16 years, we've been hooked on primary school leagues tables: lists of the top-scoring schools, the most improved, and the "value-added" table.

Not this year. The Guardian has decided against publishing school-by-school primary school results for 11-year-olds in English, maths and science in league-table format. On the following pages, we present a breakdown of the key stage 2 results for every primary school in England, geographically and alphabetically, but with no ranking lists.

Reports of how national testing and the resulting league tables corrupt teaching and learning have gathered pace in recent weeks. They have been unpopular in the teaching profession since they were introduced in 1991, but the movement against Sats is reaching fever pitch.

The Cambridge Primary Review has accused the government of ignoring over-inflated results. It claims one in three national test marks are inaccurate, and documents extensively how today's seven-year-olds are the most academically stressed ever.

The National Association of Head Teachers is poised to unveil its own inquiry into Sats. The pressure children feel is excessive, and there is

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now overwhelming evidence that the tests are damaging, they say.

Schools are under intense pressures to maintain or improve their place in the league tables. The curriculum is narrowed to focus on key elements in the test - music, arts and play are reportedly pushed out - and there is teaching to the test. Children can feel the stress the whole school is under at test time.

There are suggestions that pupils who are not expected to get anywhere near the required level are sidelined, as schools focus teaching on the borderline cases who could bring up their average.

The publication of value-added results since 2003 was supposed to iron out the problem of schools in disadvantaged areas being condemned to the bottom of league tables by the tougher job they have to do. Value-added tables show the improvements children make from the age of seven (key stage 1) to the age of 11.

But there are still flaws. The key stage 1 teacher assessments have been criticised: teachers, it is claimed, are not motivated to get good results because that will only bring down their value-added scores at key stage 2. And in schools with transient cohorts - those with immigrant populations, for example - you're not even measuring the same students.

In the most-improved table, smaller schools leap around erratically, as they only need a handful of atypical results to make a huge impact on their placement.

Education Guardian is publishing the raw data because they give parents some indication of a school's achievements. Our concern is with the process within schools. We believe tests should be diagnostic - they should help teachers understand what children are grasping, and where they are falling behind. They should not be a hurdle they must train children to jump.

League tables and testing have dominated the education policy debate for 16 years. Statutory testing of seven-year-olds was introduced in 1991 in English, maths and science. The next year, the teachers' unions boycotted the first statutory tests in English, maths and science for 14-

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year-olds. By 1995, tests for 11-year-olds had commenced. In 2005, the tests for seven-year-olds were downgraded to teacher assessment. There have been crunch times for governments when teaching unions have all but brought the process to a standstill.

The value-added tables placated critics somewhat, but concern has grown with the emergence of hard data on the levels of stress among UK children: they came bottom in Unicef's league table of children's wellbeing and happiness.

Ministers insist testing is here to stay. But, as one seasoned critic of the exams puts it: "Nobody is going to announce the Berlin wall coming down." The government is piloting a softer version in 10 areas, which is likely to be expanded under a 10-year children's plan due to be published before Christmas. Pupils will get two chances in a year to be tested, depending on how ready they are. The present system of a single test in May disadvantages pupils born in the summer (particularly those at key stage 1) who have had significantly less schooling than autumn-born babies.

The pilots have been criticised, too, but as a senior government source says: "They couldn't be any worse." All signs are there will be reform in the next year.

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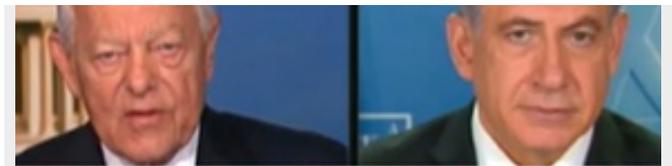
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